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ABSTRACT

The Rank Foundation's director of youth projects for northern England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland presents personal views on at-risk youth and ways that adventure-based interventions can meet their needs. Young people today suffer from the constant bombardment of advertising campaigns promoting material consumerism as the criterion for success. There is little in young people's lives to help them question such messages or develop their own values and spirituality. The adventure-based experience contains an extremely strong spiritual component, not only in the outdoor element but also in the sharing of oneself with something or someone else. The varieties of agencies and professionals that work to help young people reach their potential must overcome their conflicts of interest and begin networking. Competition among agencies for work, sometimes trying to be all things to all people, does harm to public perceptions of such developmental programs. Three programs that demonstrate a flexible networking approach link urban and rural communities to the previously isolated outdoor-center experience, incorporate creative and performing arts to complement the experiential process in their work, and network with a range of agencies to provide followup opportunities. Over the years, the Rank Foundation has provided funding for various capital items of outdoor programs, for training of outdoor program staff and related community workers, and for long-term program and agency development. (SV)

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Adventure Based Interventions: The Case for Support

CHRIS DUNNING

Chris is the Northern Director of Youth Projects for the Rank Foundation, a large UK charity with a strong commitment to developmental youth work. Chris is involved with a range of youth initiatives in Northern England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. He previously worked for the Outward Bound Trust.

My Role

I was appointed by the Rank Foundation to bring the activities of the charitable trust north of Manchester as it was felt that the majority of charitable funding was centred on southern and central areas.

I act as the eyes and ears of a Board, looking at youth work practice in particular and being proactive in looking for good practice and gaps in the work. Once work has been funded, my role is to monitor the investment made by the Trust with regular visits to see practice, meet policy makers and management as well as other funders involved. Regular written reports and annual assessments are integral to the arrangement and our directors make visits to the projects to meet the key individuals concerned. Annual business conferences also form part of our monitoring process.

The Young People at Risk

The cross-section of society deemed to be at risk does actually involve a wide-ranging selection. I have seen a fair degree of affluent delinquency in Millionaires' Row in north-west Newcastle where parents and community leaders have written articles in local papers expressing their horror at the abuse of property and anti-social behaviour.

Equally I have been to some of the most alienated areas of Liverpool or Glasgow and found the expected youth crime and hopelessness. These communities, however, have less hope and less opportunity of getting out of the rut than the more monied upper middle class.

However, in both cases I don't think that the 16-25 year old is really on the agenda for many adults in whatever part of society they exist. Whilst press and media can give a biased negative view that all young people are problems, I for one do not see this as being so. Certainly, if one looks at the apportionment of funds to those youngsters involved with crime, drugs, homelessness, etc, there is a huge bias towards per capita funding, possibly as high as 20 or 30 times when compared to that spent on the vast majority of young people who don't feature as problems.

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The problem seems to be one of a lack of relationship between those adults in positions of power and the average young adult in the community.

We are faced with extremes of approach which seek to impose disciplines and conditions of work which rely on crude and flawed approaches such as the short sharp shock and even the possibility of a compulsory voluntary service in the community - a return to National Service.

The common response to "troublesome" young people is one of disdain, mild hysteria and a lack of understanding.

Let me examine briefly the situation which faces the young adult - and not just the one with huge social need.

The multi-billion pounds worth of advertising campaigns which seek to draw the young adults to assimilate themselves with the glossy, sexy and attractive image of the "successful man or woman" - perpetrated, I would add, by adults. They didn't know they needed it until they saw it - but then they must seek to obtain it. Success equals material consumerism.

The measures of this success are the labels one wears to signify job, car, house, clothes, brand goods, etc. So how would I fare in conditions which actually excluded me from any chance of attaining such recognition and kudos? How would anyone survive in this hostile environment and feel valued or part of a community?

I once thought this might be a simplistic and naive concept about young people's lives in the eighties and nineties and yet, as I go round meeting a cross-section of young people, this is often the view I find: the adult hypocrite saying one thing and then condemning the person when he/she tries to obtain exactly what everyone else wants. I cannot condone it but I am beginning to understand it!

Then, once the situation backfires, there is a moral panic by adults and all hell lets loose.

I could not be construed as an evangelical, nor am I at all religious. I do, however, have the advantage of having been brought up in a family and a culture which instilled a sense of what can be termed values (in my case, Christian, although it could equally have been Muslim or Hindu, etc).

Young people seem to have sought other ways of fulfilling their spiritual needs and many I feel have no understanding of what spirituality might or could mean. Such voids do allow negative and antisocial behaviour and attitudes to slip in.

Whilst I am not campaigning for a crusade to address this lack of spirituality, it is a factor which I think has a part to play in the quality of life for young people and interestingly I find that there is some agreement to this amongst the people I meet through my work.

It seems to me that there is a profound need to get alongside young people of whatever background they may be and to assist them to question the current trends and look towards a third side of their nature - a spiritual context for their lives. Very little mention is made of compassion, care, integrity, humility, and - dare I mention a four letter word - love?

Yet I venture to suggest that there is an extremely strong element of the spiritual context in the use of the adventure based experience. Not just the outdoors but the sharing of something of oneself with something or somebody else.

I would however like to caution against the bungee jumping mentality of the instant fix approach. You know - run up the crane, tie on, throw yourself off - Wow! - you can do the challenge of a lifetime in thirty seconds. You have, of course, to be wearing all the right gear - boots, fleece, hat, etc!

This is being rather frivolous, of course, and I'm sure that any good development tutor could make a bungee jump into a profound experience but it does, I hope, illustrate that there is a need to put something of oneself into the *experience*. That word "experience" underpins this whole conference because it is the quality and relevance of the adventure experience and how it is used which goes such a long way to making the work successful for all concerned.

Agencies involved in Adventure-based activities/training

I have an unusual and privileged job, experiencing a great deal with opportunities to see practice and meet other funders, policy makers and young people.

What strikes me as important is the need for the different disciplines and professions to look more closely at their similarities and common approaches by networking. It's an attitude of mind as well as a concept. The Probation Officer, Social Worker, Teacher, Development Trainer, Prison Officer and Careers Officer, etc, all have some part to play in the picture.

And yet they have major difficulties and conflicts of interest, as individuals and services, in trying to work to a common aim - to prevent young people from becoming a burden on society and demeaning themselves and to help them reach their full potential and an acceptable behaviour to society at large.

I am continually struck by the lack of dialogue and understanding of the differing approaches and the lack of networking. Even within the one discipline there are hugely variable standards and methods.

I can remember the occasion when I encouraged a young lad from Sunderland to come away on an Outward Bound course for three weeks. As a young ex-offender he was attending on a purely voluntary basis as far as I was concerned and looking forward to an enjoyable time. He met various people in the course of the first day and as part of my follow-up with him, I dropped into the Outward Bound Centre to see how things were going.

He was most confused - several of the young men he was working with were attending as part of a probation order. Why was *he* there - it wasn't a form of punishment and he didn't like the idea of being associated with what he saw as a corrective course.

Funders of such work also invest in agencies for hugely differing reasons, depending on their point of view and criteria.

So it's no wonder that the media have a field day and the general public become more confused by the media hype. There is a rather confusing and variable array of attitudes to this so-called "adventure activity".

Competition between agencies for work, sometimes trying to become all things to all people, actually *does* do harm to the notion that young people derive benefit from such developmental opportunities.

The isolated outdoor or adventure centre often has large grounds and buildings to support and staff to occupy. Cultural concepts from across the Atlantic can be parachuted in to solve all the problems that exist for the young offender group and the urban based centre can attempt to replicate the major experience (without the correct equipment, resources and backup) in an amateurish way.

So you thought I was speaking in support of the work?

Well, again it seems to me that there are very experienced and committed people doing all sorts of work all over the country and achieving successes as well as experiencing failures. Each agency and project has its own thoughts on how best to work with young people drawn from certain circumstances. To achieve a truly qualitative result it seems to me reasonable to encourage a networking approach by all such agencies and between the professional groups so that they are all able to work alongside one another.

Each needs to have the understanding of how the other is seeking to create and develop the young individual.

This therefore implies a dynamic situation where young people have a number of options open to them with non-judgmental and facilitative mentors to allow them passage to a next phase in their lives. As any one of us would require in our lives, these need to be "real" outcomes which begin to make significant contributions to our life styles and quality of life.

The outdoors and outdoor adventure have a a potency and immensity of experience which does have a profound impact on the young person. I would, however, want to point out that theatre, live music, circus and environmental mediums are in many way as challenging and equally valid as methods of using an experiential process and adventure. But the link with the outdoors does have a particular dynamism which sets it aside from these others; maybe it is the closeness to nature and "the spiritual" which makes its mark.

I have been lucky enough to work alongside three different developments of a mobile outdoor resource: Mobex in Merseyside, Mobex in Tyneside and Scotquest in central Scotland. What strikes me as so viable and relevant to the debate today is that they epitomise the networking concept and flexible approach: not necessarily being the only agency involved with the young people but complementing the work of many other agencies. They seem to be able to act as the lubricating fluid between many different parts.

Scotquest is now also looking at using the creative and performing arts to complement its work. Their projects have been able to link urban and rural communities to the isolated outdoor centre experience and to network with a huge range of professional agencies who have a host of follow-on opportunities available.

And so to funders

The Rank Foundation has a long history of providing funding support for various capital items of outdoor plant and accessories. The odd ship has been built or part paid for. Refitting and re-rigging has been undertaken. Even toilet blocks have been christened by our Chairman! Residential buildings and technical equipment have been supplied in abundance. But of course, as we all know, the experience can only be as good as the people who use these buildings, ships and accessories.

Over the years we at Rank have seen a growing need to invest in the professional training of workers. We have tried to support the further training of trainers in Outdoor Projects. We have also recognised the need to find the indigenous worker, drawn from the community in which they live to help inspire and lead the young people in that community. We have used the YMCA George Williams College to develop distance-learning and training on the job for a whole host of practically based outdoor projects in centres and communities. We have also recognised the need for continuity of funding (5 years plus) and have now launched a new initiative called "Investing in Success" where we have gone back to projects and agencies to see if they can look to their future development over the next 5 years and deliver the same successes that they have already done with our funds in previous years. I think this approach of giving the voluntary sector monies up front to play ahead, is unique.

The Rank Foundation doesn't have a fixed policy - in fact the only thing written in tablets of stone is that nothing is written in tablets of stone! We do, however, have clear expectations of agencies working with young people. Management is a key issue as is monitoring and evaluation. We also expect that projects have a clear vision of what they hope to achieve and that dissemination to the broader field is integral to their policy.
The acronym that I could use to sum up the approach to our work is CLEATED:

Community
Leadership
Enterprise - not just in terms of industry, also enjoyment
Action
Training - outcomes for this
Education
Development

I would also like to add that the Foundation has an additional ingredient - heart - for added value!!

We work from a point of view of trust to begin with and the partnership is the better for it.

In saying all this, we do expect results, but this is in no way seen as dictating the way to address local needs. What a housing estate in Newcastle requires is different to that of a housing scheme in Easterhouse in Glasgow or Toxteth in Liverpool. Equally, the rural situation can be even more difficult to address.

We don't perceive young people as problems, nor do we see political short-termism as a method of addressing the real needs of young people at risk. All young people are exposed to risk and negative anti-social influences during their lives. Perhaps I should venture to say that prevention is better than cure. But what is happening to developmental work with the majority of young people? It's set to disappear. There's some food for thought - good business for the courts and prisons?

So where does this leave adventure-based interventions with youth at risk? Well, provided that litigation, scare-mongering and safety rules don't completely eradicate the elements of adventure, I see there being a healthy future for it. It rests with the practitioners, policy makers and funders, along with the legal system and statutory bodies to determine to what extent they are really in this game to see social justice and young people as the real winners.

Adventure-based work has a unique potency which can be utilised in so many excellent ways that it will always maintain a sharp flavour for challenging and stimulating youth of whatever generation. There are more eloquent writers and speakers than I, some of whom you have heard today already, who can speak about the practice and potential of the adventure process.

I know because I have *experienced* it, as a young person, as a tutor, and now as a funder. But I would not wish to see my perception of adventure-based work as the only way of doing things. I hope I'm able to look, listen and share all other views on process and outcomes. I have been privileged to be able to work alongside some superb young people (some drawn from the ranks of offenders), committed professional workers, understanding officials and, in recent years, some other Trusts who have a real feel for what is needed. The magistrates and probation officers I have contact with are clued into the challenge that faces them. I plead with the powers-that-be that they don't stifle the unique blend of adventure/experience and action which exists in the field and also hope that all of those involved recognise the need to see the common goal.
There also needs to be some form of established good working practice which draws on the experience and expertise of all those who impinge on adventure training and youth at risk.

If this conference can begin to further this collaboration between all interested parties then I feel that it has been worthwhile.